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## State urges county to act now to replace failing sewer plants

By LAURIE OGLE WHITE  
Staff Writer

Bullitt County's small, privately owned sewage-treatment plants are environmental time bombs that could jeopardize Bullitt's commercial and residential development.

That was the message state officials delivered last week to county officials, who have ignored their warnings in the past.

Development in Bullitt's rapidly developing north end has already been hindered because Brooks Run, a tributary of Floyds Fork, is so polluted. Eleven package plants discharge wastewater into Brooks Run.

At least two applications for plants on the tributary have been turned down in the past several years, according to Dave Leist, an environmental engineer with the Kentucky Division of Water.

State officials have long been

frustrated by Bullitt's reluctance to address its waste-treatment problems.

Bill Gatewood, manager of the state Division of Water's facilities construction branch, told Fiscal Court magistrates last week that Bullitt's situation is among the worst in the state.

It's the same message state officials delivered more than a year ago, but this time county officials say they are going to do something about it.

At the urging of 3rd District Magistrate R.L. "Rip" Carter, magistrates agreed to reactivate a committee formed last fall to study the feasibility of creating a sanitary sewage district.

The 20-member committee — which includes Fiscal Court members, Gatewood, package-plant owners, developers and business people — will meet at 6:30 p.m. July

26 in the Fiscal Court room. The public and those interested in serving on the committee are invited to attend.

Gatewood outlined a proposal at the court's June 20 meeting that would enable the county to form a regionalized sanitary district to oversee — and eventually take over — small package-treatment plants, many of which he said are shoddily run and frequently fail.

"We think this is going to be a problem for you in the years to come," Gatewood said.

He tried to persuade magistrates to write a centralized sewage-treatment plan in the spring of 1994, at the urging of Judge-Executive John Harper, but Harper and the court balked after learning in August 1994 they could not form a district with-

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## Age, lack of supervision hurt plants

By BILL WOLFE  
Staff Writer

Brooks Run, a tributary of Floyds Fork, is home to 11 of Bullitt County's 23 package wastewater-treatment plants. Not coincidentally, it's also the most heavily polluted stream in the county, falling state standards as a home for aquatic life and as a recreational site for people.

And while Brooks Run may suffer the worst damage, it's not the only stream beset by pollutants from the

plants.

Package plants use the same technology as large municipal facilities on a much smaller scale, serving individual residences, small cities, subdivisions, industrial sites and schools.

While plants can be well-run, many are aging systems operating with inadequate supervision or maintenance. If not working properly, they dump bacteria and excessive nutrients into the water.

Since 1985, 15 plants in Bullitt

County have been turned over to the Division of Water's enforcement office because of serious discharge violations. The state is currently taking action against the plants at Big Valley, Bullitt Hills and Hunters Hollow subdivisions and at Woodland Acres mobile-home park.

A 1994 report from the state Division of Water contends that "many package plants are burdened be-

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# Sewer plants need attention

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out creating a tax.

The ordinance was tabled when Harper received a state attorney general's opinion that said the district could not be formed without a taxing authority.

When they abandoned the proposal, magistrates were faced with borrowing \$900,000 to pay for the closure of the Collins Hill Road landfill near Lebanon Junction.

Magistrates said they were reluctant to borrow any more money or create a new tax to form the district because they already were strapped by the landfill loan, which the county will begin paying off in December 1996.

Although they agreed last fall to form the 20-member committee to study the feasibility of forming a sanitary district, the committee never met.

Carter vowed last week that the committee would meet and resolve the dilemma. "We need to get on this and stay on it," he said.

Although reluctant to borrow and tax, Harper said he and the magistrates may have to bite the bullet

and slowly begin taking over sewage treatment in the county.

The county must at least develop a plan and begin carrying it out to satisfy state water officials, Leist said.

"I would say they're one of the neediest because they're not making much progress," Leist said. He said Oldham County faces a similar dilemma, but the Division of Water is at least getting cooperation there with a well thought-out plan.

Gatewood said Bullitt should consider the path taken by Boyd County in Eastern Kentucky.

Boyd, which had 50 package plants, some that failed and caused sewage to run into open ditches, borrowed \$2 million in 1991 to start its project, Gatewood said. The county laid lines to transport waste to Ashland's sewage-treatment plant and was able to close all 50 plants.

Boyd County borrowed another \$6 million last September to continue expanding, he said.

The current loan rate offered by the Division of Water is 3.3 percent for a 20-year loan, Gatewood said. He said the county could start small, with only a specific area to serve, then grow from there.

Gatewood said the system pays for itself through user fees. Boyd County's users, for example, pay \$28 per month for the service, he said, and the money is used to pay back the loans.

Although there is no state law that makes counties take responsibility for sewage treatment, Gatewood said the day could be coming when package plants are a thing of the past. Some states, he said, already outlaw them, and his agency is under a mandate that, in effect, discourages their construction.

"We have cut down considerably on new sewage-treatment plants," Gatewood said.

## Plants source of pollution

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yond their design" and send poorly treated waste into streams.

New plants do continue to come into use in the county. Since 1989, construction permits have been issued for 11 — including units for an interstate-highway rest stop, a residential subdivision, a school and a mobile-home park, said Bill Gatewood, manager of facilities construction for the Kentucky Division of Water.

Officials say there are several reasons why the plants should be replaced by a regional system.

Most package plants have a life of 15 to 20 years — and some of those in Bullitt County are already past that age, said James Daniel of the Division of Water. That makes effective operation of the plants increasingly problematic.

In addition, the small size of the

plants makes them vulnerable to disruptions. Wastes tend to flow in surges that are difficult for the plant to accommodate.

Such surges can overload the plant, killing the special microorganisms the facilities use to eat wastes.

"Surges are hard for any plant to handle. Bigger plants have more capacity to absorb the surge," Daniel said.

What's more, small plants often do not receive the painstaking, skilled operation needed to keep them working properly, he said.

Sometimes the problem boils down to bad plant owners and operators, he said. Developers use package plants to open a subdivision, then "once all the lots are sold they have very little interest in keeping that plant going."

And if the plant is set up as a corporation — with the plant itself as the only asset — state regulators have little leverage to use with the developers. Not even heavy fines against the corporation are effective.

"If the corporation goes broke, (the developers) haven't lost anything but the plant," Daniel said. And "after 10 or 12 years, it's worth nothing. Consequently, we don't have anyone to go after. . . . In essence, they become judgment-proof."

He wants the state to require developers to post bonds ensuring maintenance of the plants. Another helpful change would be to make the people who form the corporation accountable for the violations at the plant.

Jeff Frank, a Jefferson County resident who often hikes along streams, said he can tell quickly when he's downstream from a poorly run plant.

"It is like night and day upstream and downstream of these discharges," Frank said.

In cleaner areas, "you've got a little stream that's loaded with algae and invertebrates," he said. But downstream of the treatment plant, "you see that there's no algae present, and the only bugs left are those that can live in human wastes."